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# Lone parents' experiences of Higher Education

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***“I feel like I've got a finger in the University, whereas everybody else has got their whole body in it”: Lone parents' experiences of Higher Education***

In the UK, close to one in four children are cared for by a lone parent (Policy Research Institute, 2007:8). The specific needs of students with parental responsibilities have been largely ignored by widening participation agendas, despite research evidence suggesting that this group is increasing in number (Hinton-Smith, 2012; Moreau, 2011). One of the key challenges at Plymouth (and elsewhere) is that data classifying students as parents is not collected on application or enrolment, and as a consequence this group remain largely invisible. Student Finance England no longer offers specific funding for single parents adding to the difficulties in identifying these students.

This project aimed to explore lone parents' experiences and aspirations of studying at Plymouth University. Specifically, we seek to uncover issues that relate to transition, induction, study and support.

**Methodology**

A focus group was conducted to uncover key issues of significance to single parents. Based on the themes identified in the focus group, a survey consisting of both closed and open-ended questions was developed in Survey Monkey and distributed across the university. Broadly, the survey included questions about transitions to HE, students' childcare arrangements, daily routines, teaching and learning on their programmes, engagement with co-curricular activities, financial support available and their perceptions about the family-friendliness of the university, inviting suggestions for improvement.

135 responses were received. Students were invited to attend follow-up interviews, both through the survey, and via email. 8 follow-up qualitative interviews were conducted.

**Key areas identified for improving institutional support for student parents**

Single parents are by no means a homogenous group and their experiences of HE differ vastly. However, a majority struggled with juggling roles as a student in HE and being a lone parent. Targeted support services and information to this group is called for. Other suggestions from participants included dedicated spaces for parents to work with children on campus, some flexibility in placement structures, more e-learning opportunities, assistance with travel expenses, representation within the SU and a single parent network within the university.

**Key recommendations:**

1. Identifying student parents by collecting data on application/entry
2. Making information to student parent easily accessible on university websites-targeting this group with relevant information through mailing lists
3. Ensuring Time-tables are advertised well in advance

4. Ensuring that a robust personal tutoring system supports lone-parents to get the most from their time at university
5. Greater consideration to the needs of this group whilst on university placements
6. The establishment of a single parents network
7. Bringing about change in the campus culture –encouraging family friendly events
8. Increasing flexibility in study options where possible, including blended learning

**Outputs:**

Dr Lucy Spowart was invited to present the findings of this project at the Westminster Briefing in April 2016 and has been asked to write a blog about her research for the Higher Education Academy. The key findings were also presented at the recent PedRIO Conference 'What is Teaching Excellence' (November 2016) and at the Society for Research into Higher Education Conference (December 2016).